Old Ironsides: Oliver Cromwell and the Puritan Revolution

By William P. Farley

On a cold January day in 1649, King Charles I stepped before a hushed crowd of Londoners. He ascended the scaffold, wished his executioner well, and knelt, thrusting his head forward onto the dry chopping block. The ax fell, severing his head from his neck. Then the executioner lifted the king’s head and cried, "Behold the head of a traitor."

The unthinkable had happened. A "Christian" nation had put its king to death. Spontaneously, an audible groan pulsed through the anxious throng, "a groan," said an eyewitness, "as I never heard before and desire I may never hear again" — one that represented the sentiment of many Englishmen and most contemporary Europeans.

Few recognize history’s great turning points when they occur. The execution of Charles I was no exception. The ideals of the Reformation had reached full expression, affecting even the sphere of politics, and the Puritans were the vehicle in which these ideals had traveled. They terminated in Charles’ execution.

And, no one was more single mindedly devoted to the Bible, and the political implications of its truths than the Puritan, Oliver Cromwell (1599 –1659), the man primarily responsible for the king’s beheading. He was England’s greatest 17th-century statesman and a military genius who, although lacking formal military training, was never defeated in battle. To his dismay, he eventually replaced the king, ruling England as Lord Protector. He was offered crown and monarchy but refused it.

To the ideas planted by Cromwell and his Puritan peers, we owe most of our religious and political liberty, the inception of capitalism, the birth of the scientific revolution, and the advent of denominationalism. Cromwell represented the Puritan ideals well.
PURITAN CARICATURES

Who were the Puritans? They were not a denomination but a spiritual movement of reform scattered throughout England's churches. During the 1560s the Reformation failed to adequately purify the Church of England. Many clamored to go all the way with the Bible. They were derogatorily labeled "Puritans."

"Throughout western culture the image aroused by the word Puritan is killjoy," notes Jacques Barzun. "In the United States he is the thin-lipped New Englander who passed 'blue laws' against all innocent pleasures, his only pastime being to hang witches."3

The facts quickly disprove this caricature, promoted by popular literature such as The Scarlet Letter and The Crucible. In fact, the Puritans wore bright clothes, danced, were excellent businessmen, ardently promoted higher education, were the first to allow multiple religious denominations in one country, and knew how to enjoy life. When the good ship Arabella sailed for New England in the 1630s with a cargo bound for the New England Puritans, she carried 10,000 gallons of wine (50,000 fifths), and 42 tons of beer, but only 14 tons of fresh water.4 When the Indian, Squanto, walked into the hut of the first Pilgrim settlers at Plymouth Colony they immediately did what all good Puritans do — offered rum and ale.

The spiritual tide that began with the Reformation in 1517 hit its high-water mark with the Puritan movement. The "Puritans shine before us as a kind of beacon light," notes J.I. Packer, "overtopping the stature of the majority of Christians in most eras."6

Now that we know something of the Puritans, let's further examine the life and times of Oliver Cromwell, one of the great Puritan leaders. The epochal conflict into which he was born does much to explain his life.

THE GREAT CONFLICT

James I (1566-1625) and his son, Charles I, assumed the Divine Right of Kings. This was the doctrine that the king should be head of the National Church, ruling that church through bishops subordinate to his power. Both James and Charles I believed the King spoke for God and that the King's word was to be mediated through the bishops of the State church. In other words, since the King spoke for God, James and Charles both believed that their subjects' consciences should be bound by the King's command.

However, the Reformation, which began to influence England just before James' birth, taught the "the priesthood of all believers." This was the idea that every man can, and should, bypass the king and his bishops, hearing from God directly through Scripture. Therefore, they believed it was paramount that the State give men liberty of conscience. Second, the Bible taught equality of all men, that all men are equal before the judgment seat of Christ, and that all, king and commoner, were equally subject to the law of God. These were radical ideas in the 17th century.

BIOGRAPHY

When Oliver was born, in 1599, the Divine Right of Kings had been accepted political theory for hundreds of years. The official State religion was Anglicanism, and no other denominations were allowed. Churches that "separated" or "dissented" were brutally persecuted. Many were hung or tortured for worshiping outside of the Anglican church.

Oliver was born into a middle-class family near Huntingdon, in the vicinity of Cambridge. Little is known of his youth. He studied law at Cambridge, but dropped out before completion.

During Cromwell's youth, the power of Puritan preaching radically transformed England. These preachers were uniquely gifted and empowered by God. After preaching for 2 hours, Laurence Chaderton
tried to quit: "My God sir, don't stop. Go on! Go on!" urged his congregation — such was the common hunger for God's Word. In fact, the impact of Puritan preaching on England during Cromwell's youth is one of the phenomenons of Church history.

We know little of Cromwell's conversion except that sometime in his late twenties he became a victim of this powerful Puritan preaching. From that day forward, his life revolved around the crown rights of King Jesus.

In 1625, James I died, and his son, Charles I, ascended the throne. Three years later the village of Huntingdon elected Oliver to represent them in Parliament. At this time most members of Parliament were middle-class Puritans soaked in the biblical presuppositions mentioned above. The King's Divine Rights and the Puritan Priesthood of All Believers were coming into increasing conflict. Charles asked parliament and the nation to submit to his governance. Parliament asked Charles, like all men, to submit to the law of God and the law of the land. Although Charles was an honorable man, capitulation to this request was unconscionable.

By 1642 their differences had became irreconcilable. Parliament and the King raised armies and the first English Civil War began. The war was over assumptions. Should biblical or traditional presuppositions about men's consciences and the role of civil government prevail?

**GENERAL CROMWELL**

Although Cromwell's background was that of a humble farmer and village lawyer, he possessed a gift for military leadership that neither he nor his friends foresaw. In 1642, knowing nothing about the military, he returned home to raise a troop of cavalry. His martial abilities appeared early, giving him a decisive role in the Parliamentary victories of Marston Moor (1644), (where he was nicknamed "Old Ironsides"), and later Naseby (1645).

As his successes mounted, Parliament increased his responsibilities until he soon commanded armies. He recruited young men with deep piety and vibrant faith. Ignoring established custom, he promoted officers on the basis of ability not social class. His troops marched into battle singing Psalms. His army set aside days for repentance and fasting, and devoted themselves to the preaching of their Puritan chaplains. And, everywhere Oliver went, victory followed.

In 1646, Parliament defeated the King's armies, and the first Civil War ended. King Charles agreed to share power with Parliament, allowing some liberty of conscience, and replacing bishops with a Presbyterian government. However, behind the scenes he deceitfully outmaneuvered Parliament, enlisting the aid of Scotland and Ireland to start a second civil war.

**CHARLES' EXECUTION**

A second Civil War began. It cost thousands of lives and much suffering. While Cromwell's army quickly defeated the Irish and Scotch, parliament, controlled by the Puritans, felt bound to apply justice without favoritism, even to the King. Charles had broken the law. He had committed treason. Like all men, he must be judged impartially. The King was not above, but under the same law of God as his citizens.

In January 1649 Parliament tried Charles I for treason, found him guilty, and executed him in the fashion of men. Without Cromwell's leadership and commitment to biblical justice it would not have happened. This event was the genesis of modern liberty, and it arose from the compost of the biblical presuppositions preached by the English Puritans.

**THE PROTECTORATE**

Cromwell and his men replaced the King with Parliament, hoping that godly members of Parliament would cease the reigns of power and
initiate a period of peace and justice. But Parliament fell into such bickering and infighting that it proved ineffective and could not rule.

To prevent chaos, Cromwell temporarily ceased the levers of power. Parliament offered him the crown in 1657, but he refused. Reluctantly, he ruled as Lord Protector until his death in 1658. It was a time of great economic prosperity and peace for England.

After Cromwell’s death, England looked back over two civil wars and yearned for peace and stability. Parliament called Charles’ son to return from his exile on the continent and assume the crown his father had lost. Embittered by his father’s death, Charles II persecuted the Puritans and tried to reinstate much of what his father had lost.

In 1688, after the death of Charles II and his son, Parliament passed a group of laws known as the “Glorious Revolution.” They institutionalized the principles for which Oliver and the Puritans fought the civil wars.

**CROMWELL’S CHARACTER**

Despite opinions to the contrary, Cromwell was a man of sincerity, tolerance, and godliness. For example, during the first Civil War Parliament raised his pay to 1,600 pounds, an immense sum of money in those days, but Oliver offered to return 1,000 pounds per year to the war effort. After he became Lord Protector, he extended religious toleration to Baptists, Quakers, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists — unheard of leniency in his day. In fact, he was the first modern head of state to allow different denominations to freely operate in the same country.

His letters reveal a man of deep piety, sound biblical learning, and unshakable faith. For example, to his daughter-in-law he wrote, “I desire you both to make it above all things your business to seek the Lord: to be frequently calling upon Him, that He would manifest himself to you in His Son.” This Christ-centered attitude animates his correspondence to family, friends, and statesmen.

**SUMMARY**

God raised up the Puritans and Oliver Cromwell to “Pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:10, NRSV). “Never again,” notes Samuel Rawson Gardiner, did there appear in England a persecuting Church supporting itself on royal absolutism; a monarchy resting its claims solely on divine right; a Parliament defying the constituencies by which it had been elected as well as the Government by which it had been summoned. For all this we owe a debt to Cromwell and the Puritans for whom he spoke.

Benjamin Hart contends that America owes its political and religious freedoms, not primarily to the Romans and Greeks, but to Cromwell and the Puritans whom our founding fathers fervently admired. If this is true, America owes a great debt to brave Oliver and the Puritan saints.

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Endnotes

2. Ibid.


5. The Pilgrims that sailed on the Mayflower were a branch of the greater Puritan movement.


9. Ibid., 81.

10. Ibid., 98.
